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The

**Two Hundredth Anniversary**

of the

**First Parish Church**

of

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**Stow**  
Massachusetts

Sermons by

REV. J. SIDNEY MOULTON, Pastor  
and  
SAMUEL COLLINS BEANE, D. D.

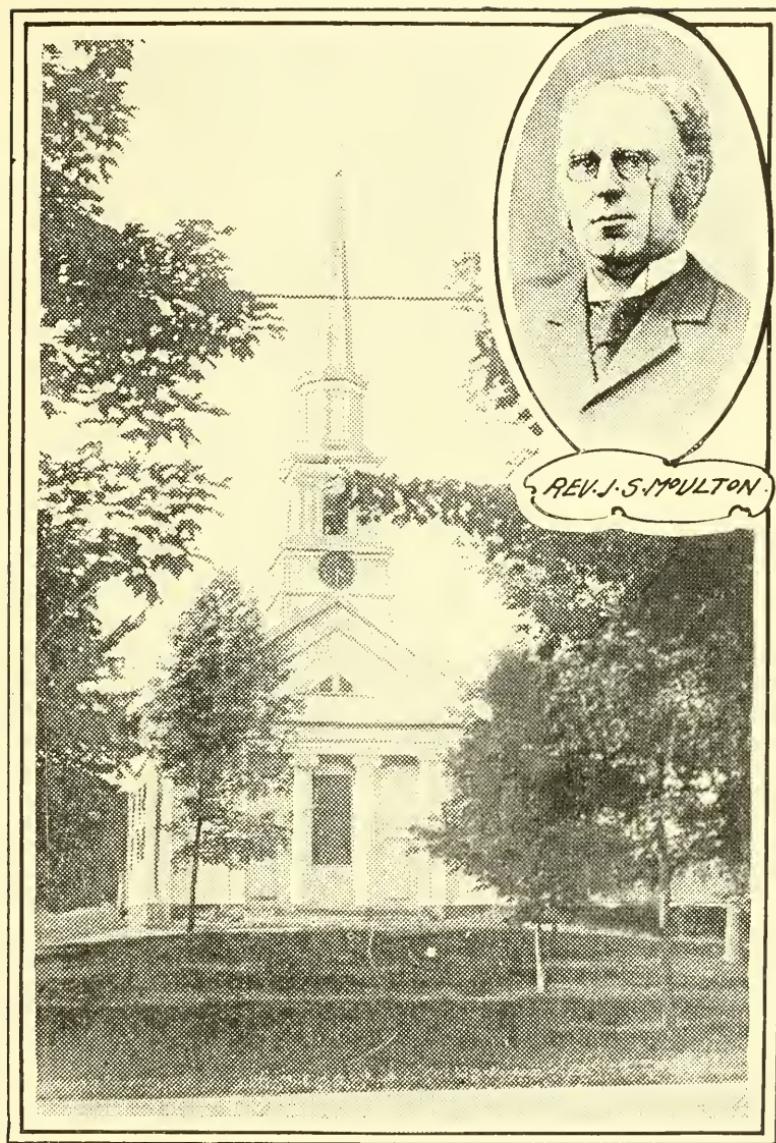
July 27, 1902

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FIRST PARISH UNITARIAN CHURCH, STOW, MASS.



## THE HOME-COMING AT STOW.

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THE first settlers of this town organized a Church Society which now, after a life of two centuries, has a firm hold upon their descendants. On July 27, a commemorative service was held, with many friends from neighboring towns and societies present. The church was well decorated with cut flowers and plants in honor of the event that had called them together. The Reception Committee, of which Mrs. F. W. Warren was Chairman, did well their part to make the social side a success, and many old friendships were renewed upon a formal introduction.

Those who took part in the services held morning and evening were as follows: Rev. J. S. Moulton, Pastor; Samuel C. Beane, D. D., of Newburyport; Rev. J. P. Sheafe, of Harvard; Rev. J. N. Pardee, of Bolton; Rev. C. H. Washburn, of Maynard; Rev. J. R. Cushing, of Gleasondale; Rev. E. F. Hayward, of Marlboro; Rev. J. Baltzby, of Hudson; and Mr. W. H. Clark, of Stow.

The music was under the direction of Mr. W. A. Wood, Chorister, and Miss Bertha F. Lawrence, Organist, with the following program:—

*Morning.* Organ voluntary. Sentences. Original hymn. Responsive reading. Anthem, "The King of Glory Shall Come in." Prayer. Response, Choir. Scripture lesson. Anthem, "Great is the Lord." Sermon, Samuel C. Beane, D. D., on the "Religious Nurture and Progress of New England during the last Two Hundred Years, as seen in the Liberal Congregational Church of Stow." Hymn, "The House Our Fathers Built to God." Benediction.

*Evening.* Organ voluntary. Anthem, "Sing Unto God." Scripture reading, Rev. J. P. Sheafe. Response, Choir. Addresses: Rev. J. Baltzby, "Religious Gains"; Mr. W. H. Clark, "What the Church stands for To-day"; Rev. E. F. Hayward, "The Unitarian Church of To-day"; Rev. J. R. Cushing, "The Methodist Church of To-day. Anthem, "God of Our Fathers." Addresses: Rev. C. H. Washburn, "The Orthodox Church of To-day"; Rev. J. N. Pardee, "The Outlook for the Country Church"; Rev. J. P. Sheafe, "The Church of To-morrow." Summary and benediction, Samuel C. Beane, D. D.

This was an event long to be remembered in the annals of the Society.

## CHRONOLOGICAL PAGE.

Town of Stow incorporated, May 16	.	.	.	.	.	1683
First Meeting-House erected	.	.	.	.	.	1686
Church organized, under Rev. J. Eveleth	.	.	.	.	.	1702
Second Meeting-House erected	.	.	.	.	.	1713
Third Meeting-House erected	.	.	.	.	.	1752
Fourth Meeting-House erected	.	.	.	.	.	1827
Sunday-School organized, June 6	.	.	.	.	.	1830
Stoves put into Meeting-House entry	.	.	.	.	.	1832
Bell presented by Mrs. Abigail Eveleth	.	.	.	.	.	1832
Church becomes Unitarian	.	.	.	.	.	1833
Organized as the First Parish	.	.	.	.	.	1834
Reorganized, under Rev. W. H. Kinsley	.	.	.	.	.	1840
Fourth Church burned, Nov. 9	.	.	.	.	.	1847
Fifth Church (present house) erected	.	.	.	.	.	1848
Tower-clock presented by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Whitney	.	.	.	.	.	1869
Parsonage presented by Col. Elijah Hale	.	.	.	.	.	1870
New Organ provided by subscription	.	.	.	.	.	1892
Last Covenant adopted	.	.	.	.	.	1895
Two Hundredth Anniversary, July 27	.	.	.	.	.	1902

## NOTES.

The bell, presented in 1832 by Mrs. Abigail Eveleth, widow of the Rev. J. Eveleth, was tolled for the first time on the occasion of her funeral, a few days after being put in place. In the fire of 1847 it fell and was cracked, but was recast and now hangs in the belfry.

The first meeting-house stood at what is now called the Lower Village. The second one north of "Strong Water Brook," or near the present residence of Mrs. F. W. Warren. The third one near the site of the Center School. The fourth was erected upon the site of the present church building.

## LIST OF MINISTERS AND PERIODS OF SERVICE.

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REV. JOHN EVELETH	.	.	.	.	.	.	1701-1718
REV. JOHN GARDNER	.	.	.	.	.	.	1718-1775
REV. JONATHAN NEWELL	.	.	.	.	.	.	1775-1828
REV. JAMES KENDALL	.	.	.	.	.	.	1828
REV. MR. CHICKERING	.	.	.	.	.	.	1828-1829
REV. JOHN L. SIBLEY	.	.	.	.	.	.	1829-1833, 1835
REV. JONATHAN FARR	.	.	.	.	.	.	1836
REV. MATTHEW HARDING	.	.	.	.	.	.	1837
REV. WILLIAM H. KINSLEY	.	.	.	.	.	.	1840-1846
REV. REUBEN BATES	.	.	.	.	.	.	1846-1859
REV. GEORGE F. CLARK	.	.	.	.	.	.	1862-1867
REV. F. W. WEBBER	.	.	.	.	.	.	1869-1870
REV. JOHN F. LOCKE	.	.	.	.	.	.	1870-1872
REV. DAVID P. MUZZY	.	.	.	.	.	.	1872-1876
REV. MR. DYER	.	.	.	.	.	.	1877
REV. THOMAS WESTON	.	.	.	.	.	.	1878-1885
REV. J. SIDNEY MOULTON (present Pastor)	.	.	.	.	.	.	1885

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## TO ESTABLISH A FUND.

As has been suggested at these meetings, an effort is being made to create a fund whereby the support and repairs of this Church may be assured. It is hoped that the friends of the Society, although they may have left the town, will not forget that it stands in need of their financial aid and assistance, and that what encouragement they can now offer may renew the life of the Society and keep afresh the interest that has been theirs for so many years.



## SERMON BY REV. J. S. MOULTON, PASTOR.

Delivered Sunday, July 20, 1902.

*“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things.*  
—HEB. I. 1, 2.

## HISTORICAL.

These words suggest a theme which is both interesting and profitable—that is, the continuance of faith—the fact that through manifold changes of form and after many years, that faith in God, once planted in the soul, is found there still—a song in the heart of humanity which never dies.

I shall, however, speak of this theme only incidentally. My purpose to-day is quite other.

I do not wish to trench upon ground which may be covered by Doctor Beane next Sunday, nor would I anticipate anything which may be said by other speakers; but I should like, since we shall have no paper dealing specifically with our local history, to recall, a few of the salient points—a few interesting facts—concerning the two hundred years which now look down upon us as a religious society. I shall say nothing not well known to the older ones of us, but the younger generations may not be familiar with the story of our past.

To the men and women who founded this society two centuries ago, religion was a profound reality. It underlay everything they did. They lived constantly in the thought of God. It was a condition imposed by the General Court in granting permission to form a township of Stow that there should be ten families who should be “of good and honest conversation and Orthodox in religion” and that “a pious, Orthodox and able minister be maintained here.” Only such as were sound in the faith could have land granted them within the new town. So did Stow guarantee the quality of its first settlers.

For nearly twenty years this chosen people sought for “a pious, Orthodox and able minister” to dwell among them; but only after seven failures to secure a man did the eighth man—the Rev. John

Eveleth—decide to remain. For seventeen years Mr. Eveleth ministered—let us hope successfully—to the needs of his people; and it was during his ministry—though not for two or three years after his coming (in 1699 or 1700)—that a church was regularly organized and a creed or covenant, now unfortunately lost, was adopted. Since that time, now two hundred years ago, there has been no break, no lack of continuity in the life of the church, nor has it been for any length of time without either its settled minister or its regular supply. This is interesting and unusual—that for so long a time there should be no continued break in the services of the society.

I find upon the church records the names of seventeen ministers who have served the society for longer or shorter periods of time. Of these, four seem to have been supplies and to have remained only about one year (or less) each. Three others seem not to have been ordained or installed here and hence not to have been full pastors but only "the hired servants" of the society.

If we deduct these seven names there will remain for the ten installed pastors an average service of twenty years each. Even the seventeen men would have an average pastorate of nearly twelve years each. This is unusual—for modern pastorates are very short. And the longer pastorates here show well the character and habit of the church—the stability of its aim and purpose.

But it is a matter of much greater interest, that of the entire period of two hundred years, *more than half* by eleven years was covered by the ministry of *two men*—the Rev. John Gardner serving fifty-seven years and Rev. Jonathan Newell fifty-four years.

I like to think of those years and what they must have meant. I like to think of the beautiful thing it was to see *two men* giving the best of their lives to the service of their people; I like to think of the deepening love, the close growing together of the hearts of pastor and people till it became almost a better thing just to see these men about the streets and to feel sure of their interest and sympathy in all the deepest and best life of the community—almost a better thing that—I say—than to hear other men preach,—their very presence being a benediction.

I cannot say of course what a lengthening ministry may mean to the people. I know only the minister's side. But I am sure that for *him* each added year means deeper interest, means growing more and more into the lives of the people and the interests of the community till whatever concerns his people becomes to the

pastor almost a personal matter and an occasion for personal joy or personal sorrow. I cannot understand how any man can stand with a people year after year, can come close to them in their trials and their joys, come to know their life experiences and the history of their children and their children's children and not come to feel a closeness to them and an interest in them which is almost paternal. That is one advantage which early times had over to-day. Then the influence of the ministry was not just a touch-and-go influence—a merely transient force. It reached down to the roots of the life and was a power for good, ever deepening because it was founded upon intimate knowledge.

Then, too, an added reason for long pastorates—for the first twenty-five years of his ministry every man flounders, blunders, makes mistakes, sometimes serious ones, which can be corrected or outgrown only with the years. We ministers at first are very like Elihu in Job's ancient parable—full of the conceit of youth and ignorance. We are apt to begin our work with the conviction that if only we can get a hearing we can convert the race. At twenty-one we are most of us (ministers) ready to attempt to run the universe, with the inevitable result that we do nothing well. Only with years and experience does wisdom come. And so I say I feel sure that these long pastorates of half a century and more must have been rich in gracious influences.

Of course, not all these two hundred years have been years of undisturbed serenity, though we seem not to have had such serious difficulties as some had. But not even law can compel men to think alike. Differences began early to appear. Liberal thought crept in and spread with alarming rapidity. Trouble first arose with the Universalists. These believers began to "sign off" and withdraw to churches in other towns. By the year 1830 these Universalists had become so numerous that a society of that faith was formed here, which lived for twenty years. Naturally, the relations with the mother church were never very cordial.

A little later an open rupture came, and the old church itself passed over to a more liberal faith or mode of thought. Channing's influence had proved potent. It resulted in many church divisions, as you know. This church was no exception. Mr. John Sibley was the last pastor called and settled by the town, and during his ministry the break came.

"In 1833," say the records, "the First Parish was organized, embracing all who had not withdrawn from the old church and

who were know as *Unitarians*." That is, up to this date we had been an *Orthodox Congregational* church. In 1833 we became a Unitarian Congregational church, and Mr. Sibley, dismissed from pastorate of the "Congregational Church and Society in Stow" (1833), returned two years later as pastor of the "First Parish (Unitarian) of Stow."

The transition appears to have been effected with much less difficulty than in many cases, though a delay of some months occurred in organizing the First Parish.

It would be pleasant, did time allow, to trace the growing liberality of thought through these two hundred years, but that will probably be done next Sunday. Suffice it now to say that five different covenants or statements of faith have been used by the church. The two earliest of these have been lost, unfortunately. The third, in use in 1829—when Mr. Sibley first came—and still found upon our records, is in the form not of a creed but of an agreement or bond of union, in which the candidate for admission to the church publicly gave himself "to God, the Father, to Jesus Christ, the Savior, and to the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit, in a most solemn covenant, never, never to be forgotten." The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were acknowledged to be "the foundation of faith and the guide to life." Beyond this there is no dogmatic statement, but those who enter into this covenant agree "to watch over each other in brotherly love." Some years after the division came, and when the "First Parish" had been organized as avowedly Unitarian some seven years, a new "Expression of Faith" was adopted (in 1740), under the leadership of Rev. Mr. Kinsley, then pastor.

This was more of a creed and reads: "We believe in the Divine Authenticity of the Bible and agree to live in all respects as God shall therein reveal himself to us." This broad and undogmatic statement of faith and purpose stood unaltered until some seven years ago (in 1895), when by vote, as you remember, we adopted what may be a no better but only a more modern form of statement, namely this: "Believing with Jesus, that true religion is summed up in love to God and love to man, we of this church, in the faith, freedom, and fellowship of the Gospel, unite for the worship of God and the service of man." Under this statement seven new members then united with the church—the last, I think, who have done so. It will thus appear that a broad and liberal spirit, which insisted very little upon dogmatic tests, has

from early days characterized this First Church of Stow, whether in its Orthodox or its Unitarian form.

This church has experienced in its life the vicissitudes through which many a church, in country regions at least, has passed. It has known many changes. It has had five houses of worship—we are now occupying the fifth. It has seen the people change. It has witnessed, and especially in recent years, its congregations dwindle, its pews grow vacant, its attendants pass away and their places not made good. In the records of Mr. Muzzy—no more than thirty years ago—I read often such entries as these: "Preached to-day to one hundred and twenty-one people"; or "Preached to one hundred and thirty people"; or, it may be, "one hundred and seven people"; or sometimes, "eighty-four." Rarely does the record drop below sixty, though I do find a few entries which seem more familiar, as, "Preached to-day to thirty-seven people, but the day was warm"; or, "Preached to twenty-four people, and the Sunday-school was omitted. It has proved a stormy day." From various causes the congregations have grown small till to-day sixty to sixty-five is a good number, and it is only upon special occasions that we rise to one hundred or more. If this were peculiar to ourselves it would be cause for immediate consideration and concern; but it is not peculiar to us. It is rather a general condition in which many—perhaps most churches—at present share. The causes for it are varied.

With waning numbers have come, also, to us as to others, waning resources. Salaries have grown small as numbers have diminished; pecuniary assets are not large to-day. Yet in spite of many discouragements this little church has sturdily held its way and gone on in faith and hope. God grant it may do so yet for many a year! I rejoice that never yet have we been obliged to ask aid of our parent association (the A. U. A.). I trust we *may not* have to do so. There is no cause for immediate disheartenment if we are in earnest. There are upon the list of those to-day more or less closely connected with this church, including only those who would naturally come here for a service if one were needed—only those upon whom the pastor feels at liberty to call, some sixty-two or sixty-three families. Surely a society with sixty families need not die unless it will. We do not propose to do so yet.

What the future may hold, and whether our children and their children will observe here the three hundredth anniversary, I do

not know. I do not care to predict. Let us rather now be grateful for the past and try to get into the spirit of that past.

Let us try to think back two hundred years and think what it means to have two hundred years of history looking down upon us. I confess I like to get into the spirit of those years. I like to feel their influence; I like to feel as I stand here, week by week, that I am not dealing with an institution of a day—a merely transient force. I like to feel that I have behind me a record of such noble devotion. For two full centuries now the voice of prayer and praise has gone up to God from this little hamlet. For two full centuries men and women have here met the Father face to face in life's profoundest experiences. Here have they brought their trials, sorrows, joys, thanksgivings. Here have they wrestled with temptation and disheartenment and here won the victory. Here have they married and given in marriage; here have they brought their dead; here for two hundred years have they consecrated themselves and their children to life's noblest purposes; and here have they somehow found help in their need and strength to do the Divine will. Here have they left a grand record of fidelity. I like to recall all this. I like to think of the congregations that gathered here of old,—of those who may to-day fill our seemingly empty pews with an invisible congregation, crowding our little house to overflowing with an unseen, immortal presence. Who would dare say this may not be true?

This is not the time to mention names—but we all know them—the names of those who have worshiped here and have left a record of noble consecration and fidelity.

And there are many whom no preacher of to-day can name, but whom you know and whose names are written upon your hearts in characters of loyalty and love. Is it nothing to feel their presence as you gather here in this church which was your father's and your father's father's church, as it is yours? Is it nothing to belong to this line of descent? Is it nothing to come into the inheritance of their spirit and to feel, it may be, the mantle of that spirit descending upon us?

Would, indeed, that upon this occasion of our Two Hundredth Anniversary we might do *something* to show our appreciation of our precious inheritance—something to show fittingly our love for the little First Church of Stow, now two centuries old.

“ Long may the ancient meeting-house  
Rise from the village green,  
And over all the country round  
Its belfried tower be seen.

Still may the call to praise and prayer  
Be heard each Sunday morn,  
And bind in growing faith the past  
With ages yet unborn.”

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(NOTES NOT INCLUDED IN SERMON.)

After the old church became Unitarian several attempts were made to establish an Orthodox church, but without much success. In 1839 a church was started, which lasted a few years and had two ministers. But in 1852 so many withdrew to the church in Maynard that the Orthodox church here died. The movement for a stricter church was revived again some seven years ago, when the “Union Chapel” was established by Rev. Mr. Corless (Baptist) and others. This “Chapel” is still flourishing, the predominant element being probably the Baptist influence.

The Methodist church in Gleasondale is the child of the church in Marlboro.

The first society and house of worship was at “Gospel Hill,” now in Hudson. The church and society was transferred to “Rock Bottom” in 1855. Although not an offshoot of the First Parish it took away some families who formerly worshiped here.



## DISCOURSE BY SAMUEL COLLINS BEANE, D. D.

Delivered Sunday, July 27, 1902.

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*We are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.—GALATIANS IV. 31.*

In the early days of the seventeenth century a little company of men and women in Scrooby, England, one of a small number of similar groups, had separated themselves from the national church in which they had been brought up, and as a band of Christian disciples on their own account and in their own way were worshiping at private houses, as the early Christians did. This they did in departure from what they deemed to be the errors, moral evils, and spiritual oppressions practised by the mother church, in which they would have no share. In doing this they defied the law, and imperilled their liberty, their property, and their very lives for conviction's sake.

In 1608 most of them resolved to flee from the despotic spiritual guardianship of their native England, and after great hindrance from the law-officers, escaped into Holland, where, under a liberal government, and among appreciative Christian friends, they remained for about twelve years. Then seeking a larger and more independent career, one hundred and two souls of their company, nearly all of them young or of middle age, set sail for the Dutch settlements near the mouth of the Hudson river; but either from stress of wind and tide, or by the treachery of the commander of their little vessel, they found themselves landed on Cape Cod, and shortly began a settlement at Plymouth. Here they planted again the church which they had organized in England, and maintained in Holland, and it endures and flourishes to this day—popularly known now as the Unitarian Church of Plymouth. We gratefully name these immigrants, the Pilgrim Fathers.

Turn to another religious group. The Puritans, with Endicott, who settled Salem eight years later, had not, like those Mayflower people, severed themselves from the state-church of the mother land; nevertheless, on reaching the Massachusetts shore, they organized independently after the pattern of their Plymouth brethren. From these two churches has sprung every Congrega-

tional church or society on this side of the Atlantic, whether now known as Unitarian or Trinitarian. Vastly more than this. If I read history aright, it is from the pattern and genius of these two small churches in the New England wilderness that has sprung our republic itself—the rule of the people in things spiritual being simply and naturally transformed into the rule of the people in things civil and political. It is at least significant that Thomas Jefferson in Virginia and the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew in Boston each first saw the possibility and desirability of a civil government in America, of and by the people, from observing the workings of a church of the Congregational polity.

What, then, was the early church of New England, the type and seed of so much that we now hold dear and indispensable?

It was a church of the *people*. The people were the entire sum of its existence—no pope, no bishop, no priest, no parliament to legislate, no council to decree. It had no appointed prayers, no prescribed ritual. Its minister was simply a man chosen by the people of the church in free meeting, to be, for the time, their preacher and teacher. He was a minister only by their creation; and when he ceased to perform for them his appointed functions, he ceased to be a minister, unless, or until, some other congregation took him up and made a minister of him again. He was the people's *minister*, a *servant* and not a *rector*, or *ruler*, as the English church called, and still calls, its priests.

Each church was independent. When at the ordination of the first ministers at Salem, Plymouth was represented by a delegation to express sympathy and brotherhood, the delegates claimed no authority even to advise, and the Salem Christians would have resented such advice unasked.

Such, in brief, were the churches of these New England colonies in the first half of the seventeenth century. What, then, was the fundamental principle of a New England church in those primitive years? It is stated in its full meaning by John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrims: "In the gathering of a church," he says, "I do tell you, that, in what place soever, whether by preaching the Gospel by a true minister, by a false minister, by no minister, or by reading and conference, or by any other means of publishing it, two or three faithful people do arise, separating themselves from the world into the fellowship of the Gospel, they are a church truly gathered." Again, Robert Browne, the reputed spiritual father of Congregationalism, writes: "Nor are ministers, or their

power, necessary to the first gathering of a church . . . but the power is in ourselves immediately."

Let us now turn to the covenants of the early New England churches, of which those of Plymouth and Salem are clear examples. And here let me say that there was, in no church, a formulated creed, there were no listed doctrines; simply religious agreements or pledges, often of one or two sentences only. Omitting the unimportant parts, the Plymouth church covenant ran thus: "We, the Lord's free people, join ourselves . . . into a church estate in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in all His ways made known to us, or to be made known to us, according to our best endeavor." Notice not more its brevity and its singleness of purpose, than its breadth and progressive outlook—"to walk in all His ways, made known to us, or to be made known to us." They had not yet attained. They were still learners. They did not venture on a formulated and finished creed.

The Salem covenant of 1629 is even briefer, while it is similarly broad and undogmatic: "We covenant with the Lord and with one another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself in his blessed word of truth." This was all.

Who of us to-day could not bind ourselves by such covenants, and stand on such platforms, without bondage and without misgiving?

Those people had had a surfeit of priesthood, of councils, of magnates meddling with their spiritual concerns. Henceforth the people, "the Lord's free people," were themselves, under God, to rule in the church, nay more, to constitute the church, and to be the whole of it.

To be sure there was less diversity of theological belief than manifests itself in our time, but it seems to have been the sincere purpose of these long tormented people to join the whole religious community together in one devout and peaceful fold. The Salem covenant, says William Bentley, the distinguished scholar and historian, "never could be intended so much to display opinions, as by written obligation to fasten men together."

But, as time went on, the spirit of Christian unity, that like a magnet drew all together at first, began slowly to weaken. With the growth of communities different beliefs and various tastes arose. As the Puritans, by lapse of time, forgot in a measure the sufferings they and their fathers had undergone for liberty's sake, the enthusiasm for liberty cooled down, and the ideas of liberty became

confused. As early as 1650 one and another church had, chiefly for the instruction of the young, devised certain statements of doctrines. After a while one and another church began to use these statements as tests of membership and fellowship. This was the little rift which years afterwards resulted in the disruption of so many churches, and the lamentable bitterness of sectarianism from which we suffer even in our day.

That all this dividing apart on theological opinions was contrary to the original Congregational idea of an inclusive church of which all the religious people should be members and rulers together, I need not take time to show. Just as, long afterward, the unity of the American people in the love of freedom, as declared in the Declaration of National Independence, grew less strong by increase of sectional interests and debate over political dogmas, resulting at length in secession and the Civil War, so in that earlier time the unifying spirit and principle of Congregationalism, which is simply democracy and independence in the church, yielded to the narrowness of theological tenets and the hateful rivalries of sect and creed.

By the time the church in Stow was organized this dogmatic and disuniting spirit had received a strong and sad momentum, chiefly from certain ministers who prided themselves on their "sacred scholarship" and theological acumen, and grew arrogant in the assertion of them. The church in Stow was founded ten years after the witchcraft trials and executions in Salem, in which certain autocratic ministers had acted so direful a part. There had come to be a morbid and feverish desire to hunt up everything which by a passage of Scripture could be put under condemnation or suspicion. The Old Testament command "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," just suited the existing mental mood, and twenty good men and women were executed in that one year, 1692, at Salem.

The first covenant of the church in Stow, if it could be found, would doubtless show considerable of that same spirit which in its darkness and severity had so recently sent a score of worthy Christians to their death for no actual sin or fault whatever, and on evidence as absurd as ever convulsed the listeners at a mock trial.

It is a fact of singular interest to you and me to-day that the Rev. Samuel Parris, who, before the organization of this church had been employed for a short time as preacher by the people of Stow, became afterwards the pastor at Salem Village, now Danvers,

where, in 1692, he took the lead in the prosecution and putting to death of what are known in history as the Salem witches. It is his name that occurs so often and luridly in the records of those trials which are still preserved. And it is of additional interest to us to-day that five years after that melancholy event in which he had taken so leading and tragic a part he was recalled by the people of Stow to be their minister again, and for a short time resumed his ministerial services here. Evidently his participation and leadership in the Salem affair did not lower him seriously, if at all, in the minds of the Stow people of that time! Had that superstitious mania mastered Mr. Parris during one of his two short residences here, rather than, as it happened, between the two, then it is likely that some of your ancestors of this town would have fallen victims to his blind credulity and unrelenting will, and Stow, not Salem, would have had the world-wide notoriety of the witchcraft tragedies.

Now, just as surely as religion becomes cruel or unlovely, its power and influence begin to be undermined. Never was England more unreligious than at the time, or shortly following the time, when she was inflicting threat and torment upon the future fathers of New England for their style and conscience of worship. At that day, in the English church, a well-behaved and sober-minded priest was an exception. Never, again, has New England been so unreligious as during the period that soon followed the priestly rule of Cotton Mather, aided by colleagues like Samuel Parris and Nicholas Noyes. The bigotry and stern wilfulness of prominent members of the clergy resulted in alienating many of the people from the church and its ministers. That period, embracing about the first forty years of the seventeen-hundreds, has been characterized in common speech as the period of the "Great Declension." During that time it would seem as if a large number of the Massachusetts churches would have gone out of existence had they not been supported by town taxation under compulsory laws, with the sheriff at their back. On the present voluntary system probably not one in three of them would have survived to tell the story. Many of the people were beginning, under sharp provocation, to use their reason. They were getting weary of priestly rule and autoocratic creed-making. Many who did not doubt the reality of witchcraft in the world still believed that the evidence in the Salem cases had its origin largely in personal spite, and that the animus of the affair had been cruel and out-

rageous. Piety had come to be at a low ebb. The reaction from the old order was terrible. Many of the churches were well nigh abandoned. Nor were there then any voices of great believers and prophets to rouse the people in their spiritual natures.

But an awakening came at length. Jonathan Edwards appeared, and Whitefield and the disciples of Wesley, all representing in different degrees the old order, but with it a fervent and entrancing conviction of spiritual realities. And ere long the people became so awakened that many of them, in the interests of religious truth and divine reason, were ready to cast off the old system altogether—turning their backs even upon Edwards and Whitefield. Those wonderful preachers had indeed produced a “Great Awakening”; but the result of every sharp spiritual arousal is, in good time, to bring men to a sense of their souls’ rights and their personal liberties.

Before many years the American Revolution came, and the political yoke of England was thrown off. What the Revolution meant politically we all know well enough. What it meant religiously and theologically is perhaps more important. It meant the divine rights of man, civil, spiritual, intellectual—his right to participate in his own government—his equal right to think and judge, to believe and worship, in his own way, on his own account. It meant a tyrannical parliament and a stupid-souled king discredited and banished from power in these colonies; it equally meant the New England minister, who had so perverted his trust as servant of the people, and had turned self-appointed spiritual despot, remanded to his proper place.

See more specifically what the Revolution implied. Its Declaration of Independence declared men—all men—to be, not ruined creatures, as the creeds said and the clergy had been preaching,—not demons of evil who do wrong in preference to right, and sin as naturally and almost as inevitably as the sparks fly upward,—but beings upright by nature, natural kings and princes under God, fit for self-government—mentally and morally competent to help rule the land. The Declaration declared by implication that every man in his normal state is so in free communion with the source of all right and goodness that he is a heaven-appointed ruler of the country he lives in, and that no power on earth, in church, or state, or anywhere, has a right to govern him against his consent. Till that old idea of man’s total depravity was denied or put in the background there could have been no movement for a liberal gov-

ernment like ours; for who could be insane enough to entrust a commonwealth or republic to the management of totally depraved human beings? The common run of men did not see the logic of all this, but the great leaders saw or felt it. There is now no doubt that Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, and, with few exceptions, every man of that period whose name we presume to rank with theirs, were Unitarians in principle, if not in dogma, holding the most exalted religious views of man's nature and dignities, and believing in salvation by character, and not by creed or substitution. I cannot, with much searching, find a single utterance in the speech or in the letters of any prominent American patriot of that time which is keyed to the note of Calvinism.

Hardly had the Revolution ended, when these religious views of man and his high destiny became agitated in nearly all the Congregational churches of New England. This agitation is now known as the Unitarian movement, dating, in its more vigorous state, from about the year 1780. It resulted, at length, in the division of the great Congregational body of Massachusetts into the Unitarian and Trinitarian wings—the liberal party predominating in nearly every considerable parish along the sea-board, ruling the College at Cambridge, and setting the type of religious and intellectual life in Massachusetts.

In this division the church and town of Stow when the issue fairly came, heartily espoused the liberal side.

It would be interesting and instructive to read the written agreement which bound these Stow Christians together at the organization of the church in the very beginning of the eighteenth century. But that, as well as the second covenant, is missing. I fear, as I just said, that it shared something of the theological rigidity of the period. Nearly all the churches suffered from the priesthood of that unhappy epoch. Nor do I undertake to say that the original framers of those early free covenants lived always up to them. It was too early in the world's history to expect this. Moreover, their life here was so disturbed and imperilled that it would have been almost impossible for them to practise unbounded religious toleration, and not to ward away, or put in arrest, some persons whose existence among them threatened their own religious liberties, and meant the possible or probable overturning of the fair estate they had so well planted in the wilderness. But that they had and cherished the ideal of largeness and liberty which is involved in the various church covenants of the time, and saw it as

the high end to be aimed at and striven for, there can be no reasonable doubt. Their working by-laws did not always harmonize with their organic or theoretic constitution. Their conduct, under difficulty and danger, not infrequently contradicted their principles. Alas! is not that the way with all of us?

Out of that period of its birth and infancy, and the influences then dominant, this church, like many another, has had to climb, step by step, into larger freedom and sweeter Christian fellowship. Its covenant, first in use in 1829, is delightfully broad and Christian, and well calculated to band together an entire religious community. In 1840 its members voted: "We believe in the divine authenticity of the Bible, and agree to live in all respects as God shall therein reveal himself." In 1895 this church, in a new manifesto, mounted up to that Christian freedom and simplicity which is so perfectly expressed in the Plymouth and Salem covenants of 1602 and 1629: "Believing with Jesus that true religion is summed up in love to God and love to man, we of this church, in the faith, freedom and fellowship of the Gospel, unite for the worship of God and the service of man." This might well have been written by John Robinson, the Pilgrims' minister. It is pure Congregationalism in its native width and largeness, in its ample adaptation to all the religious people. May this church, this grand old town-church of Stow, always wave such a banner!

I have thus far spoken of the New England churches chiefly with reference to their popular membership and proceedings. I must not neglect to bring before you a little more clearly the part which the minister has acted in these old New England towns. In theory, and in fact, as I said, the Congregational minister is only one of the people, with no superior rights or authority. This is true to the letter. Nevertheless, the Congregational minister in our part of the world, has had an influence peculiarly his own, from early days till now, which, in proportion to his talents, has been greater than that of any other member of his community. Especially has it been so, and is so still, in the church of a country town, like this charming and fair-famed town of Stow. The pastor here has had no ritual to ply, no theological system to be continually working upon in his pent-up study. He is largely an out-door man. His duties and relations are commensurate with the life of the town. He is of the people. From the beginning he has been the leader and supervisor of the people's education. The schools, public and private, have been his peculiar charge. His liberal culture fits him

intellectually for this function. He knows books, and studies methods. He is familiar with the parents and the children. Professor Stowe of Andover once wrote: "My experience has taught me to despair of establishing, with any permanency, even a good district school, where there is not a good church, and an intelligent minister to watch over it." Often the minister has taken his turn and set the pattern of teaching. Rev. Dr. Bentley of Salem wrote in his diary in 1786: "I altered the time of the school terms. . . . After prayer heard the boys read in turn, then sent them to their classes and writing-desks. . . . Then mended all the pens." Why not?

In agricultural towns, in early times, the pastor was a farmer, and sometimes the best one of them all. He was a politician, and watched carefully, as he ought, the turn of public affairs. He had, as some one said of him long ago, "a good judgment in secularities." As a rule he could hunt and fish with his hardiest parishioners. He probably had a larger correspondence with the rest of the world by mail than had all his flock combined. He set the taste in books, he furnished the pattern of decorum. I must not forget to say, that as early as one hundred and fifty years ago, he was a good laugher and cheerful story-teller. Up to the early years of the nineteenth century, the minister, like all New England gentlemen, wore a powdered wig and queue. Like his parishioners, the country minister of a hundred and fifty years ago was often clad in leather breeches, both during the week and in the pulpit. It was a minister, Nathaniel Ward of Ipswich, who devised the first civil code of Massachusetts. It was a minister, Hugh Peter of Salem, who first put this colony into a healthy financial and business condition. It was a minister, Jonathan Newell of Stow, who by his invention, gave to the world the great mechanical and commercial benefit of cut nails.

At just the period when this church was organized, as we have seen, the ministers of the larger or seaport towns, who, like the Mathers, father, son, and grandson, had grown big in scholarship and spiritual egotism, began to lose something of their unnatural and uncongregational prestige. Some of them had got to be little popes. But a turn in affairs had come, which was changing them back into ministers, that is, servants, of the people. The witchcraft matter seems to have been the last pound of the unendurable load. The blind, dumb following of ministers thenceforth began to abate. The people were beginning again to use their mental and

spiritual wits. Fortunately for Stow, when John Eveleth was settled as its first pastor, that official in Massachusetts was soon coming to be what his title was meant to import—a helper, and not a dictator. The elder President Dwight of Yale, writing about the year 1800, says: “The real weight of clergymen in Massachusetts and Connecticut consists wholly in their influence—an influence derived wholly from their office and their character.”

The all-round character of a minister’s vocation in a country town—as farmer, writer, educator, counsellor, leader in all manner of citizenship, tended to widen, enrich and mellow his nature. He was in live touch with all the people, from the babe he had just christened to the wrinkled nonagenarian. He had to bear a hand in a hundred matters besides sermon-making and studying books. He was settled for life and he expected to breathe his last breath among his people, and that a modest slab would one day mark his body’s resting-place in the village burying-ground. The town church was for every orderly citizen and his family the social center; it was the rallying point for all Christian and humane endeavor in common. People who differed never so variously came up once a week to shake hands, and to worship together the same God with Christian devoutness and good-will.

Now let us for a moment glance at the world’s clock when the Congregational church of Stow was organized. It was within a year of the founding of Yale College; it was two years before the printing of the first American newspaper; it was several years before the establishing of the first regular post-office on this side of the Atlantic. Surely it was a time when the church and its educated ministry must needs fill a large and mighty place in the people’s life.

At the time this church was gathered, the minister was elected by the people, the church members first nominating a candidate and handing over their choice for the whole body of voting citizens to approve or reject. Sometimes the church named two or more candidates from whom the entire assembly of voters made choice of the one under whose ministrations they all—both saints and sinners—thought they could most happily or profitably sit. Some stringent Christians contended that the final election should be made by the church-members only, but the people resisted that claim, and have resisted, and resisted triumphantly, ever since. At that time the minister preached his own ordination sermon,

sometimes an older clergyman, for his wisdom's sake, delivering another discourse on the same occasion.

The meeting-house of early days was never lighted for evening service; it was never warmed by artificial heat. The sermon was often much more than an hour in length, rarely less; the sand-glass on the pulpit—for there were few other time-pieces—not infrequently being turned more than once during the service, be the temperature, outside or inside, never so far below zero.

The order of worship about the year 1700 was exceedingly plain and of few parts. Until about fifty years later there was no scripture-reading, such an exercise seeming to our Puritan ancestors to savor of a ritual performance. The almost universal order of worship was this:

FIRST. The Long Prayer.

SECOND. The singing of a Psalm from the Old Testament, either in the usual version, or in some metrical rendering. What we call hymns were unknown in Sunday worship.

THIRD. The Sermon.

FOURTH. A Shorter Prayer.

FIFTH. Another Psalm-Singing.

SIXTH. The Benediction: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with you all."

Often the benediction was prefaced with, "Blessed are they that hear the word of God and do it,"—said by the minister.

Such was the homely and unadorned style of worship that edified and satisfied the people of New England two centuries ago.

I have thus very imperfectly sketched the main principles and some of the practices of the Congregational or people's church, with a few hints of later evolutions.

I wish that I had time to speak to you of some of the ministers who have officiated in this Stow church, whom it has been my privilege to know, beginning with John Langdon Sibley, including, among those who have passed from earth, such excellent pastors as Reuben Bates and my dear friend George F. Clark, including, also, some of the living whom I greatly esteem, and ending with your present minister, who to your great profit has been so long with you. May your existing relations continue for years to come!

Can any one doubt, even from this hasty consideration, that Congregational principles and the Congregational spirit, in their natural unfolding, are very broad and liberal, charitable and in-

clusive? Nor do these principles and this spirit shine the less brightly, or show themselves the less practicable, because the early fathers or their children did not always carry them to their perfect ultimate.

It should also be clear to us that when the separation came a century ago, and the Congregational body was split apart, it was the liberal party that, in the matter of unity and tolerance, most perfectly adhered to the Congregational ideas. It was the liberal wing, whatever its faults and shortcomings—and they were many—that restored the largeness and simplicity of the original covenants. It was the liberal or Unitarian wing that, in the legal contest for the possession of church property, insisted, according to long-time precedent, that not a handful, more or less, of church-members should control the meeting-house and manage the general funds and elect the ministers, but the people of the congregation or parish in their broad religious interests. It was the same wing, as in this church of Stow, that in due time abolished all dogmatic tests of membership and communion. With all its mistakes and transgressions the liberal wing committed not this one, namely, to split the hitherto peaceful communities into theological and sectarian divisions; but with whatever wisdom and power these liberals had they strove to keep the people one and undivided in the dear Master's name.

I need not remind you how, under their mild and tolerant rule, theology has mellowed and grown reasonable, how metaphysical dogmas, which nobody could clearly understand, and which benefited nobody, but which chiefly served to provoke discord and intolerance, have given way to a religion of life and character, according to the uninvolved teachings of Jesus. The so-called liberal wing would have no narrow and hateful separation between God's children on earth, and for the world to come it would not allow eternal happiness for one, and for another everlasting banishment from the Heavenly Father's presence. Are not those of our towns and cities sweeter and wholesomer to live in where the amiable and tolerant type of Congregational Christianity of which I have spoken has simplified and humanized religion and weakened the nerve of sectarian rancor?

In no part of New England, I believe, did this liberalizing of religion work more admirable results than in these old town churches of Middlesex and Worcester. In no other section, I believe, has the standard of Christian character and experience for

the last three generations been more upright, devout, and truly Christlike than in this particular region.

What in the history of this church of Stow I honor more than almost any other one thing is its patient and earnest endeavor to maintain Christian unity, and to ward off dissension and separation for human dogmas' wretched sake. In this endeavor it has sometimes suffered temporary loss of numbers and support. But to this day has bravely and magnanimously stood this old First Church, striving and praying to fulfil the Master's prayer, "that they all may be one."

May this church live and prosper and be strong in its uplifting and regenerating influence for centuries to come! Let us believe that its work is but fairly begun, since life and truth are large beyond measure, and God's days and ages are exceedingly long.

It was assumed by your fathers and founders that the Protestant families of this town, unless the town should gather too large a population, should and ought to agree to kneel before their God together on a broad and simple religious basis, even as they vote together, educate their children together, rejoice and mourn together, bury their dead together, and live happily and thankfully in each other's neighborhood. Can it be that the religion of Jesus is narrower and more circumscribed than any other important life-interest?

This church to-day, with a covenant which all Christians can understand and approve, extends its warm and wide-open hand, without question of honest theological difference, to every God-loving and truth-seeking person within its reach.

It is a thousand times more important that thus, like the early disciples who often wrangled among themselves, but who agreed to love the Master together, and worship his God and their God together, the people of a community should be one in spirit in spite of differences of opinion, one in mutual love, one in bowing before God and serving mankind with one heart and voice, than that this person or that person should have his particular sectarian name, or mode of baptism, or style of prayer-book.

Let us hope that the day of separation and exclusion for theological opinion's sake is drawing to a happy close. Let the central and unquestionable and eternal things actuate us more and more. Still does the Heavenly Father watch lovingly over his churches. Still is Jesus, in his clear simplicity, the way and truth and life. Still is liberty the essential condition of true piety, since a

soul in spiritual fetters cannot worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Still does he who leaned on Jesus' bosom whisper to us, "Little children, love one another!" Still does the clarion voice of Paul proclaim, as of old, that in Christ there is no heresy but intolerance and lack of brotherly love. Heeding these heavenly calls and monitions, the future is still bright for the churches of God named for his divinest Son.





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